

Canal Park

Each year spring comes to Canal Park in stages: first, the anticipation, gray snow piles melting into sodden, dull-green grassy areas; then the first leaf buds, fresh green on bare branches; and then, in a rush, foliage bursting out on every tree, bush and groundcover. Each spring it is the same, an open invitation to everyone in the city to witness the banishing of winter and the ushering in of renewed life in many forms. Each year it has been the same, but, for Evelyn, not this year.

She sits on a park bench overlooking the pond, a dammed-up section of the old canal that runs through this lower end of town. Children play by the water's edge, watched by mothers from the corners of their eyes while talking animatedly with other mothers. Young couples stroll arm in arm along the paths, dogs on leashes tug their owners toward tantalizing smells, older people walk slowly, working out winter's stiffness from their joints. Evelyn does not notice, lost in thoughts of past springs and times that are gone forever. She is convinced that the gray winter of grief saturating her life is permanent and will never give way to spring.

A small man in a shapeless coat approaches the bench on which Evelyn sits. He pushes a battered shopping cart carefully packed with a wide assortment of useful items, many discarded by less discerning people. Bending over, he picks up a pen cap and carefully places it in a container for such small items. He looks at the unoccupied end of the bench opposite Evelyn, who sits hunched, staring at the ground. He rubs his grizzled chin and glances at the woman, wary that she may wave him off. She seems to ignore his presence. Maneuvering his cart alongside the bench, he carefully sits as far from the woman as he can. He begins to sort and rearrange his belongings, mumbling to himself.

Evelyn becomes aware of the man when he begins to speak, seemingly to himself, but with a theatrical flair. Annoyed that her gloomy reverie has been interrupted, she turns away, folding her arms. She is about to get up and leave, when he says something that catches her like a blast of cold wind. Abruptly, she turns. "What was that you said?"

He looks at her, startled, and edges away.

"It sounded like something from Shakespeare," she says.

He nods, watching her.

"Was it directed at me?" she says.

He looks uncertain, then shakes his head.

"Tell me what you just said a moment ago."

He hesitates, his eyes focusing in the distance. "'What's gone and what's past help should be past grief,'" he says in a ragged stage voice.

Evelyn chokes, her voice breaking. "How dare you talk to me about grief! You have no idea what I have lost, the best person that ever lived." Her eyes fill with tears and she turns her head away.

"Sorry," he mumbles and returns to his sorting.

The only response is a stifled sob.

After several minutes Evelyn peers furtively at the man. He wears a nondescript overcoat, even though the day is unseasonably warm. A knit hat covers his head, tassels dangling from both sides. He hums softly while he works. His unassuming cheerfulness irritates her.

"You're bothering me," she says. "Why don't you move on."

He pauses, his fingers on a small object partly covered by an old radio. "'It's not enough to speak, but to speak true,'" he replies.

"You're telling me what I feel is not true? You, a homeless man? I don't want to talk. Go away!"

"'Words are easy, like the wind; faithful friends are hard to find,'" he says.

"You are not my friend!" she practically shouts.

"'A friend should bear his friend's infirmities.'"

The gall of this man to consider himself a friend. She is fed up with people who claim they are friends, but who have begun to avoid her. Her back stiffens. "You can go to hell!" she cries and adds, "That goes for all my so-called friends, too!"

Evelyn takes a deep breath and tries to relax. She exhales slowly and realizes that the heavy weight of grief has lightened in her chest. She feels a little more alive, if only for the moment.

Her friends have been telling her to share her grief and not to let it fester. But as she continues to wear her grief as a badge of faithfulness, they have begun looking for excuses to avoid the subject altogether. She knows she needs to talk, but her pride has always stopped her. The longer she has put off sharing her hurt, the harder it has become to initiate a conversation about it. Maybe it has become a habit, a way to assuage her survivor's guilt.

"I want to be alone. I need time to think about what I'm going through." She does not look at the man beside her.

He has stopped sorting and is watching her. "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break," he recites.

Not just the words, but it is how this man speaks that moves her more than any advice her well-meaning friends have offered. Is it that obvious, she thinks, that a homeless man can see through me? Or is he just spouting Shakespeare quotes randomly?

She feels the need to talk to this stranger, this homeless vagabond. He doesn't seem like someone who will judge her, see her as weak, or over-emotional. "How is it you know so much Shakespeare?" she asks..

He seems to perk up. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more..."

"I'll bet you were on the stage at one time," she says.

"True is it that we have seen better days."

"How did you come to this?" Evelyn feels a modicum of pity, looking at him.

"Things past redress are now with me past care."

"I had another life too," she says. "I was happy --back then."

The man nods, fingering a tassel hanging from the side of his hat.

"Alfred and I got married 32 years ago," she says. "We had a wonderful courtship. I was totally in love with him, and he with me. We decided not to have children, but to save our money and buy a house."

The man has been listening attentively and now murmurs, "If money go before, all ways do lie open."

"There you go again," Evelyn says. "Have you got a quote for everything?"

"Words," he says. "Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart."

"How does a broken heart begin to talk?" she asks, looking away.

"Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead, excessive grief the enemy to the living."

Evelyn glares at him. "You are cruel, toying with me like that."

"I must be cruel, only to be kind."

"Stop it!" she cries. "You aren't helping. You can't know how much I hurt."

"Sorry," he mumbles, then lifts his eyes. "No, I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing."

Evelyn sits nursing her grief. But, somehow, it doesn't feel as sharp or compelling. She realizes she would rather talk with this stranger than continue to let grief dominate the moment. "Have you ever lost someone you were very close to?" she asks.

"My grief lies all within and these external manners of lament are merely shadows to the unseen grief that swells with silence in the tortured soul."

Evelyn feels a wave of compassion and kinship with this enigmatic man. "Yes," she says. "Yes."

He smiles shyly. "Thus of every grief in heart, he with thee does bear a part. These are certain signs to know faithful friend from flattering foe."

Evelyn stares at the man sitting with his overburdened, cluttered cart. He could be any of the occasional street people she has encountered in the park. How is it that chance has brought this particular poet, deranged or misguided as he may be, to this very park bench on this very day?

How could such a person, disregarded by much of society as an invisible inhabitant of the street, be able to touch her in ways none other could? Is it through his poetry, using words not his own, but those that have been spoken through centuries on stage and in private? She feels a kinship with all who have ever known unrelenting grief. Somehow, through chance, or her readiness, Evelyn knows something is changing in her. As the focus on her grief begins to wane, she feels a mixture of sadness tinged with a sense of relief at no longer having to bear its full weight.

"You are a remarkable and exasperating person," she finally says. "I don't know how you have the nerve to intrude on my private grief, but you have made me feel a little better."

"He that is thy friend indeed, he will help thee in thy need: if thou sorrow, he will weep; if thou wake, he cannot sleep."

She laughs, actually allowing herself to laugh. "I wish I remembered my Shakespeare enough to give you a retort," she says.

"Having nothing, nothing can he lose." The unshaved face breaks into a broad smile.

Evelyn becomes serious. "What's it like to live hand to mouth on the street?" she asks.

The man thinks for a moment and says, "And this, our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."

"I don't know how you do it," she says. "I can't imagine living without a hot shower, decent food, a comfortable bed to sleep in."

"Poor and content is rich, and rich enough," he replies.

"Don't you ever try to find a place to live? For one thing," she waves at his cart, "a place to keep all your junk?" Almost immediately she knows that was unkind. "I didn't mean that like it sounded. I meant, getting a job, or some kind of help to find a home of your own."

"What's done can't be undone," he says.

"I don't know what you've been through, or how you got to be where you are, but there must be someone, some agency, that can help you."

"I am not bound to please thee with my answer."

"You know what I think? I think you are hiding behind all your quotes and not willing to face reality."

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

"Be that as it may, I only wish you the best. You're the first person who has taken an interest in how I feel and not criticized me, or belittled me for it."

"Everyone can master a grief but he that has it," he says.

"Maybe that's it," she says. "You seem to have known enough grief in your life to recognize it in mine and empathize."

He does not reply. Evelyn looks at the little man. The light seems to have gone out in his eyes, his face expressionless. Whatever animated his earlier conversation is gone. He turns to his cart, stuffs some stray pieces of cardboard into a niche and stands up.

Evelyn rises from the bench. "Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry if I said something that hurt you."

He looks at her blankly. "Don't worry lady, I'm going," he says. He turns and, slowly pushing his cart, shuffles away along the path.

Evelyn watches him go, feeling the edge of loneliness begin to creep in. The short time she has spent with this unexpected visitor has given her respite from her grief and loneliness. "Thank you," she whispers. Then she takes a step and calls after the retreating figure, "Thank you, mister. Thank you."

The man turns, one hand on his cart. He seems to hesitate. Then he raises his other hand in recognition before turning back to the cart and continuing on his way.

Evelyn stands reflecting, sorting through her feelings. They seem to be as disordered as the little man's cart. She can hear children laughing and playing. A breath of warm air moves her hair. She hears ducks chattering in the pond and mothers calling to their children, stirring memories that are more poignant than painful. She feels a subtle change, little inroads being made into the landscape of her grief.

Evelyn starts walking, stepping off the paved path onto the spring-green grass. She moves toward the playground, drawn by the happy laughter of the children. Snatches of lines by Shakespeare mingle with thoughts of the homeless man's visit to her park bench. When was the last time she had read or recited lines by the Bard? Bittersweet memories of sharing poetry with Alfred rise in waves that threaten to swamp her thoughts.

What were those lines she learned when playing a part in As You Like It? Deeply submerged snippets of memorized verse begin to rise and reassemble in her mind. "Live a little, comfort a little, cheer thyself awhile." That line meant little to her at the time, but now it is fraught with meaning.

Sunlight slants through the newly leafed trees, warming the afternoon and splashing the playing children with light. Sounds of the ducks on the pond, people chatting, a dog barking, mingling with the laughter of the children, herald the spirit of spring. Canal Park casts its spell on the city and Evelyn can once again feel it. "Live a little," she thinks. I've forgotten how to live in the moment. Watching the children, Evelyn can see it played out: the spontaneous way they interact, shrill voices calling, their emotions running the gamut.

One child sits at the edge of the playground, occasionally glancing at his peers, throwing chips of playground material at a trashcan. Parents, gathered on benches near the drinking fountain, pay no attention to him. The loneliness that lurks at the edge of Evelyn's mind projects her feelings onto the solitary child. I know how you feel, she thinks, looking at the little boy. "Comfort a little, cheer thyself awhile." The lines from the past creep into her mind. Maybe those words don't apply to myself alone, she thinks.

Evelyn walks slowly around the edge of the playground toward the small boy. She sits a short distance from him on one of the landscape timbers that line the play area. Smiling, she looks at him, but he avoids her gaze, stirring the chips between his feet.

"Having fun?" she asks.

He glances at her, makes a wry face and says, "No."

"I didn't think so," she says.

He makes no reply, continuing to stir the chips.

"It's no fun being alone when everyone else is having all the fun," she says.

"Yeah," he says, without looking up.

"It doesn't feel very good, does it?"

"Uh-uh." He glances up and catches her gaze.

"I feel that way, too." She moves closer to the little boy.

They sit watching the other children playing. Neither of them speak, a wordless understanding settling in.

The boy leans against her and Evelyn puts an arm around him.